# WOMANHOOD IN ART

VENUS DE MILO
EVE
MONA LISA
BEATRICE CENCI
MADONNA OF THE CHAIR
SISTINE MADONNA

By PHEBE ESTELLE SPALDING

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1905s

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LOUVRE, PARIS

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# INTRODUCTION

IT IS the effort of art to relate itself to life in terms of beauty; and of life to interpret its aims in forms of action and endurance. There is a philosophy of each which makes the one choose for its motives external grace and reality; the other define its privileges and duties by current gain or loss.

But there is a nobler interpretation of life than that which concerns itself solely with the fleeting things which must be borne and done; and of art than the representation of an ephemeral charm or incident. Such a conception finds in every worthy act, in every form idealized in marble or in color, a messenger of life. It makes beauty the memory and minister of good.

Beyond the dreary levels of the passing hour there lies a background and a foreground, a record and a promise. And it is the highest office of art, I believe, to turn thitherward our gaze—back to the ideals of our uncorrupted race, forward to the prophetic "dream of man and woman diviner but still human"; to select those elements of a remote,

perhaps a mythic, past which have in them the gift of eternal life; to justify through faith or aspiration that assurance which has power to give our purposes and deeds new poise and beauty.

It is with such an understanding of the functions and responsibilities of art and with a keen appreciation of the service which the genius of ancient and modern times has rendered the women of my day, that I have studied and enjoyed some of the world's masterpieces. And it is with the enticing hope of sharing with those of kindred tastes and aims a measure of the stimulus and satisfaction which this study has afforded, that I have written this modest interpretation of a few of the best-known ideal conceptions of womanhood in art.

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# VENUS DE MILO

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LAST of the long line of antique sculptures in the Louvre, in the center of a little saloon, stands the Venus de Milo. The statue has been the occasion of much research and clever controversy regarding the date of its creation, its true name and the technical significance of its posture. But queries such as these are of interest chiefly to the student. To us it is of moment because it represents the loftiest of those noble women of the imagination who ethically and spiritually no less than æsthetically constitute what we are used to call an ideal, and who furnish for ourselves and for our homes inspiration to the highest in goodness and in beauty.

The loftiest, I say—for the Venus de Milo bears no trace of blight or weakness or wrong. Within her face of calm there is no sign of stress or agony. She has nothing to do with the morbid activity and anxiety of our own strenuous day. Power is the expression of her form and posture, but it is a power unfretted by ambition,—reposeful, limitless. Her claims upon our admiration are the fitting ones of

beauty, dignity, and completeness. She is the product of an absolute art; the triumph of Nature's unchecked harmonious forces. She is an ideal,—all, everything women would aspire to be; out of their reach, perhaps, under the fevered conditions into which most of us are born; out of reach in her physical charm, her mental vigor, her spiritual calm. Yet looking at her every woman learns the better what are the real things in life, what is true achievement.

The rare union of her aptitudes and graces makes unnecessary those social devices which aim at restoring the balance of attractions in less symmetrical women. Her physical gifts satisfy but do not intoxicate. Her mental attitude is characterized by clear and true perception, by that discrimination which sees small things as small, great things as they are.

Her religion is the natural reverence of a being that recognizes, instinctively and fully, the relation of the Highest to His creatures. She need not call upon her spiritual resources for things which do not rightly demand such dignity. Her reason, her health of judgment, will spare her conscience and her feelings. She saves for the exercises of her soul those higher problems and emotions which link creation with Creator.

Her personality is the natural expression of her sanity and poise. She is not "gracious," for there is no hint of patronage in her noble bearing. She is

not "queenly"—she does not affect distinction above other women. But she is comrade-like. Those who come to her come to take and to give. There is no consciousness of superior merit in herself, of any lack in others. She neither sits in judgment upon those whose ideals and actions are different from her own, nor lets go her own ideals because of theirs. No one in her presence will feel more his own deficiencies, but these will gradually, unconsciously lessen. No one will report her unapproachable, or even divine, in the suggestion of a birth and habitation among celestial beings. Despite the classification which mythology has given her, she is a woman whom a lover or a friend may fondly claim. With such her sympathies will be constant and ready but not fevered. She will never fret, never weary, never chill.

The marks of spiritual conflict and exaltation which the old Italian masters put into the faces of their pictured saints rose from a necessity of life as they themselves felt it, born of conditions which forced a sacrifice of much which Nature meant to be wholesome and desirable, for the sake of that higher development of the soul. Doubtless their conceptions were, in a measure, true; for now that sin has entered and sometimes masters woman's heart and spirit, we recognize how stern must be the struggle to conquer and expel it. But the suppression, the pain, the conflict, even the triumph, do not represent

an ideal. Strength, beauty, freedom — these are the demands and the results of normal, healthful life; and it may be for inspiration to life like this that we shall turn, and wisely, to the woman whom, centuries ago, the poet-artist created for Greece and for the world.

To restore to balance our warring energies of action and of rest; to destroy by neglect the petty, the unlovely, the untrue; and to develop into fullest fruitage, by communion with their like, aspirations of bravery, serenity, goodness and power, — this is the appeal of the Venus de Milo to all of womankind who wish and strive for that which life and art and poetry have proved that God and Nature meant for them to be.

# EVE

# EVE

BUT the perfection of the Venus finds a rival in a radically unlike type of woman loveliness. Across the rich Parisian city, in the marble-lined entrance hall of the Luxembourg, crouches the quivering form of Dagonet's Eve. Historically we are accustomed to think of her who is the motive of this presentation as the remotest of her sex, and so the least connected with our modern conception of feminine excellence. But not so do artists picture her. The symmetrical, satisfying, yet unintoxicating charm of dignity and completeness which marks the Venus, belongs to the unsullied and unconscious age of heroism — an age far antedating anything we know of life, that age when men were gods. In Eve, by whatever artist formed, we note always the limitations and graces that connect her with our own more emotional, self-conscious time.

The statue of the Luxembourg is modern in all respects. There is the fearless selective realism which distinguishes the more recent from the older art. There is the physical correspondence to the mental agony which is so signally modern French,

and which is less sufficiently expressed even in the Laocoön. There are the curves, the rounded limbs and form, the shapely hands and feet, not of some woman of a dim and undeveloped past, but of the rarest models of today. Yet a glance convinces us that we behold no other than the peerless mother of our race. Looking at her we may well wonder whether the calm completeness of the eminently satisfying does satisfy. Here is beauty past all telling — beauty that tempted the serpent, who tempted back again and wrought the ruin of our race. No queenly gifts are hers — our great foremother's. Her dowry is softness and grace and overwhelming helplessness. We, disciplined in self-confidence and reserve, scornful of weakness as of crime, with one look at her unschooled agony, throw over our harsh censure and shower upon her the compassion which suddenly we realize is indeed her due.

Sweet Mother Eve, gentlest of victims, most innocent enslaver! As I study this unsurpassed portrayal of her charms, so exquisite and so tender, that were I a pagan I could worship her great beauty; a knight — and I could die to shield her helplessness, I am forced to wonder whether, in our alert and most progressive century, with our practical efficiency, our keen sense of what is righteous and expedient, we may not be losing in some vital measure our sympathy with what is simply innocent and loving, fair and

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EVE

*ERNEST DAGONET*; LUXEMBOURG, PARIS

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errant. I am compelled to doubt, too, whether, with all our art cults and philosophies, with the sternness of our material and scientific training, with our literary, civic and social responsibilities, we are not ignoring, in our scheme of usefulness and development, the untechnical, unanalyzed enjoyment of the lines of natural beauty — of beauty, not æsthetic standards; beauty of human face and form no less than grace of intellect or soul.

Yet, after all, even in this melting marble we insist upon a finer satisfaction than the sense-joy which color and line afford. Nor can the woman's love-inspiring helplessness hold us perfectly in thrall. Our deepest sympathy, our warmest love, are wakened by her heart-convulsing grief. Dimly she guesses of the evil she has done. She cannot foresee the centuries of conflict and of pain which her single sin has brought upon uncounted millions of her perplexed and erring daughters. But one gift, one grace with her deep sin, she has bestowed upon them — a gift compensating, far outweighing the evil she has done. O frail, repentant Eve, thy mighty power of sorrow, thy sacred abandon of remorse, thy holy gift of tears, evermore since thy fall and ours, how have they kept in human sympathy our hearts, how saved from fatal sin our souls! For since that first sad day when woman's gentle sweetness proved her peril and her fall, though oftentimes in joy we wander far astray,

so long as it is given us to weep true tears of penitence and fresh resolve, no harm can slay. Our tears shall cleanse our souls and humanize our hearts,—nay, transform our weakness and our sin.

# MONA LISA

# MONA LISA

HALF reluctantly we turn from the impassioned personality of Eve to other and far more complex types of womanhood. The evil and the good of our first mother live after her and have become curiously blended in her posterity of daughters.

In the most splendid of the painting saloons of the Louvre there hangs the world-renowned, the inscrutable, the impossible Mona Lisa.

What has given her fame—nay, power? Is it beauty? Hardly a score of those who daily pass before her will answer yes. Is it talent, or intellect, or cleverness? There is no sign of unusual mind or skill. Is it moral poise? Soul depth? Soul sweetness? Never have I known of one who seriously proposed this answer to the query. Is it, then, the genius of the undying painter who wrought her face, her form? The artist only makes visible to duller eyes that which he sees exists.

Perhaps no devotee of the Mona Lisa can satisfactorily, even to himself, answer the questions which the most superficial observer may propound. Her

lovers say she has a charm, a fascination, an authority. What is the charm — if charm it be? The power? Wonder for yourselves. I am her slave, and yet I cannot name, much less define, the witchery, I confess. But there are certain qualities within that living face, those passive hands, that mystery of hair, which many an hour of half-conscious study seems to have revealed and even made familiar. Do I dream? Is my dream true? That form, that face of gentle quiet belongs to the most powerful class of women rulers. The Mona Lisa is a type of the "eternal feminine" — the feminine not in its queenliness, its voluptuous beauty, — far less in its spiritual *rapport*. Not the noblest, nor most tender, not the most generously human traits of womanhood are veiled yet reflected in her elusive face. She is a true daughter of Eve, yet not in any of the ways which make the woman of the Luxembourg entrancing. To this one belong the subtleties of womankind; that most entangling gift of coquetry; the art of centralizing herself as the focus of social and romantic life. Would the painter have lingered four years over portrait of living woman of any other type — have lingered and labored and then, baffled by that feminine evasive something, other and more than beauty, stronger than intellect or goodness, which enthralls the Adams of our race, have confessed, at last, his work unfinished? Yet, though his utmost skill could not express, through

MONA LISA
LEONARDO DA VINCI: LOUVRE, PARIS

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MONA LISA
*LEONARDO DA VINCI*; LOUVRE, PARIS

her distracting smile, her mocking eyes, her loosely folded fingers, that which he felt rather than saw, the great immortalizer has left in the accessories of the picture a hint stronger than that conveyed by the curious minglings in form and feature. That sinuous stream, the winding open lake, the faintly outlined woodland shore, — what does it mean? Mystery? The mystery of resistless, treacherous lure? There are no words, as da Vinci found no colors, yet we recognize and half reject while we admire.

There are other women of this class — some the plainest of their sex; some clever, and some stupid; Helens and Cleopatras, Rosamunds, of every time and land. Their beauty, gifts, or lack of both, are made effective through feminine manipulation. Their unquestioned separation from the sometimes nobler, the more broadly human of their sex, they count a triumph. Rulers are they of kingdoms large and small; and though other women with keener brains, perhaps, and kindlier hearts, with finer tastes and stronger souls, may despise their arts and resent their sway, they must recognize and reckon with their power.

# BEATRICE CENCI

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AS RELATED to the Mona Lisa by likeness or by contrast, many a woman represented in art comes to the mind. Opposed to her artful mystery is the open mysticism of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, or the absorbed rapture of the Joan of the Pantheon; allied to her elaborate indifference, the self-conscious vivacity of the Woman with the Muff, Madame Le Brun, Laughing Saskia; opposed to her consciousness of sex, the armoured Joan of the Luxembourg. Portraits and fancies, the realistic and the romantic, lend themselves, in their various elements and phases, to obvious and fascinating comparison with this insinuating woman. But as related to her by peculiarly significant forms of difference, I have chosen as her companion study the well-known face of the Cenci.

It is impossible to imagine what has given this picture its general popularity. Not that it is lacking in any of the elements which give the artist pleasure, but it would seem, for many reasons, to be naturally removed from the popular taste and knowledge. Unlike most of the subjects that are universally

known, this one does not belong to the large, always open galleries that are maintained by government, but to the private palace of the Barberini in a way street of Rome. Nor does the treatment greatly attract the popular eye. The somber coloring of brown and white, the pale and pensive face, all absence of accessory,—these commonly, I believe, lead to a disappointment to those who have studied the picture solely from the copies and colored prints which have done so much to form a supposed acquaintance with its tone. Neither do the numerous and almost perfected photographs very much better reveal its distinctive quality. Indeed, this painting is one of the few considerably studied in photograph where an entirely different conception is to be gained from the color. It is as difficult of reproduction as the Mona Lisa of analysis. Hawthorne's exquisitely sensitive and balanced taste and mind felt and expressed more completely than any technical critic its singular and powerful artistic effect through details. Yet, while we respond most fully to his interpretation, I am inclined to think that much of the popularity of the picture would be lost, with something of its just appreciation by the most sympathetic, were we wholly unacquainted with the history of the girlish woman portrayed. But with her tragic life in memory, the earnest, pleading face, the faintly reddened eyes, the posture of half bewilderment, half weariness, the

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GUIDO RENI; BARBERINI PALACE, ROME

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altogether childish and yet womanly self-detachment from her sorrow and her surroundings — these thrill and warm the sharer in her great painter's interpretation of her soul and deed. The sympathy and faith she rouses are the antipodes of the uneasiness that Mona Lisa inspires even in her admirers.

Moreover, though we love the sweet face and reflected innocence of heart of Beatrice Cenci, the longer we gaze the more we are drawn into her own attitude of separation from herself. It is the deed, the deed, which Beatrice thinks upon — the crime with which she is charged. She has wrought that which the world calls wrong — done it in secure confidence of her own right motive, her own disinterested judgment. She has slain the one by natural ties most dear, for the love and safety of one by natural ties remote. She has espoused a cause to her fatal in its results, which represented in her mind that which was right, and *must be done*. With her girlish will and woman's hands, single and fearless of soul, she has given no thought to self, no credence to the wiles of compromise, no quarter to her trembling heart. But *now* the deed is over; the crime, if crime it be, accomplished; she longs to translate to the mind of the observer the real motive of her action, — not for the sake of self-defense, but for the cause of justice.

Beatrice Cenci is the finest, the most sensitive

type of the reformer. She stands forever among those women who refuse security at the expense of right or what they term the right. Untrained, immature in judgment, the girl, we may believe, misunderstood her mission; we may even believe did a wrong in *itself*. But her sincerity, her stern sweetness of purpose, her unfaltering though, perchance, rash act, her courage, which feared nothing but evil and injustice, — these place her and immortalize her in literature and art and life among the highest, noblest of womankind.

# MADONNA OF THE CHAIR

# MADONNA OF THE CHAIR

IN THE city of Florence, rich with its shrined memories of artist and saint and seer, within the well-known gallery of the Pitti, stands the easled picture of the Madonna of the Chair. Artists praise its soft, rich colors, its exquisite technique. To the student it marks an epoch in the development of a great master's style. The church loves it for its divine portrayal of the holy maiden-mother. But Raphael wrought the picture not for devotee or scholar or for fellow-craftsman. It was the home dream of the unhomed painter, the truest and sweetest conception of human wealth and content that has ever entered the heart of man.

It is idle for women of this or any other generation to rail against the institution of the family, the bondage of motherhood, the simple joys that have their birth and their development within the narrow circle of the home. Equally vain is it to contrast the achievements of the wife and mother with the triumphs and enjoyments of those of our sex who have won for *themselves* independence, fame, distinction of *any* sort; for while to a few women it is

allotted through their own personalities to inspire, enslave, fire to heroic deeds, or to accomplish such themselves, by far the larger, happier number find their abundance in the peace of home and in the clinging love of little children. These are the means by which such rule their *larger* world; these the motifs that poets and painters recognize as holiest and most harmonious. Happy and noble the woman who lives her life nobly and happily in other spheres, other activities,—from duty to herself that she may keep her faith with womanhood; to others, that she may serve distinctively some great need through unusual and heroic personality, and in kingdoms forbidden to the home. Yet the poet and the painter are not wrong in setting instinctively before all women, of all times and lands, their highest, sweetest, most religious theme of art—woman, the mother, the server, the comforter, the keeper of the home.

MADONNA DELLA SEDIA

RAFFAELLO SANZIO; PITTI PALACE, FLORENCE

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# SISTINE MADONNA

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THE Madonna of the Chair—how sweet it is, how true in its supreme simplicity! No other artist, we are told, has equalled, in happy beauty, this dream of chaste and loving motherhood.

But to *this* man there came *other* visions, such as opened to the Hebrew prophets when they sang of Zion, scourged and purified, redeemed,—yet not the perfect vision. Ever before him gleamed an unseen, heavenly beauty; hovered the elusive assurance that of the best which he had wrought there was yet a better; that of the truest there was sometime to unfold to his eager soul a larger, purer truth. And so in faith and hope he dreamed and fulfilled his dreams, and dreamed again. Legends of saints and martyrs of the church he spread upon his glowing canvas; myths he portrayed; sweet women's faces; men who had mastered life; angels and archangels and many a story of the Man divine. But evermore his pencil lingered over his dearest dream—of motherhood; and so he pictured most the sacred woman and her holy child—sometimes a sweet maiden face gazing in

rapture upon a tiny babe; sometimes the poised and lovely matron; sometimes the holy Queen of Heaven, with saints and angels at her side.

And still the vision faltered, and still he wrought, and men of his own time proclaimed him prince of painters, until, one day, the heavens were opened to his gaze! Then, like an idle fancy, melted the earth-scenes he had painted, his older dreams of bliss, of happiness and good. Something else he saw, different, more lofty, ultimate,—and still the vision was of motherhood; yet of no fair and unschooled girl of virgin innocence; no calm-browed woman shielding the shrinking babe within her arms from every breath of harm; no high-erected queen receiving homage from the hosts of heaven, crowned by the Lord of lords.

Far otherwise! A woman stands upon the whirling clouds; clasped by her stronger arm she holds her child folded to her warm breast; his head nestles within the hollow of her neck. The posture tells of mutual love and sympathy. And yet the child within his mother's arms has become to her suddenly no longer all her own, her son for whom to spare from wrong or pain she would not count her life-blood dear. To her far gaze has been revealed a countless throng of human lives of every age and clime, dark-stained with sin, heart-worn with suffering, mad with injustice, sick with fear. The skies bend black above them; there are none to listen to their cries.

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But then upon a distant hilltop she beholds the lonely figure of a man. He bows in agony. Dark drops of blood are gathering on his brow. He has heard the anguished human prayers for help, and his soul answers back in sympathy. He turns upward his face — it is the face of the child lying against her breast. There looms beside, the cross; she sees the crown of thorns, she feels the kiss of the betrayer. She hears the man's despairing cry of helplessness, of self-surrender, and the final "It is finished," from his appealing lips. Yet, though the vision pierces her soul like a sword, some holy calm has mastered all her mother's fears. Serene she stands and gazes still before her and beyond, and she beholds dimly a radiance lighting the lonely hilltop and the towering cross. It grows and sends its gleam still farther till it touches, enfolds, illumines the dark multitudes of suffering humanity. And with its growing light, pain softens, wars grow less, until, down the centuries that are *yet to come*, the mother sees a race of men and women redeemed from hatred, sin and strife. And the strong heart of the woman thrills with the new-born significance of life, and joy, and grief, and death, and service; and she casts aside from her great soul the dread of present ill, the hope of present gain or good, and consents, unfearing, to her own unbounded sorrow, and for her son, to ignominy, death, defeat. And suddenly the things of heaven become to her the

things of sight, and she beholds the smile of angel faces near.

The little son within her arms catches the mighty import of his mother's mood, her sacrifice and consecration; and with her he yields himself to unknown pain and self-forgetting service for mankind.

And the glory and the beauty of the woman standing there place her beyond the worded thought of man, the woman beyond all women of all time.

For it is not in the self-poise of the unrivalled Venus, not in the passionate womanliness of Eve, nor in the witchery of Mona Lisa, nor the unguided heroism of gentle Beatrice, nor yet in the sweeter beauty of the Madonna of the Chair, that sculptor, poet, painter, has dreamed his loftiest dream. Something other — deeper, more stable, farther-reaching in its vision, its import, its fulfilment; some more-embracing, godlike woman-meaning must be that which satisfies his noblest mood and ours.

And such a vision, such an assurance, such an inspiration, the divinest of all painters has left to *us* — the care-encumbered women of yesterday, today, tomorrow — in the spiritual insight, the soul-strength, the unmatched service of sacrifice, of the divine Sistine Madonna.

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